

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07

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SSM-03 ACDA-07 /087 W
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R 271052Z AUG 76

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9304

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

USMISSION USUN NY

USIA WASHDC

DIA WASHDC

S E C R E T DAMASCUS 5711

E.O. 11652: NGDS

TAGS: PFOR, SY, LE

SUBJECT: LOCAL VIEWS OF SYRIAN STRATEGY IN LEBANON

1. SUMMARY: ASAD REPORTEDLY TOLD LIBYAN DEPFONMIN SYRIA WOULD NOT PERMIT ATTACK ON WEST BEIRUT. SARG SOUNDING OUT LEBANESE POLITICIANS ON PRIME MINISTERSHIP IN SARKIS ADMINISTRATION. SYRIAN PLANES REPORTEDLY SUNK SHIP UNLOADING ARMS IN TRIPOLI HARBOR PREVIOUS WEEK. SYRIAN ARAB AIRLINES PILOT REPORTS HARRASSMENT BY LIBYAN AND ABU DHABI AIRPORT OFFICIALS HOSTEL TO SYRIAN POLICY IN LEBANON. DAMASCUS MAY BE PRESENTLY UNDECIDED ABOUT PROPER COURSE OF ACTION TO DEAL WITH EMERGING BALANCE OF POWER IN LEBANON. SYRIAN MILITARY LEADERSHIP MAY PREFER DECISIVE ACTION TO OVERTURN BALANCE, WHILE ASAD MORE LIKELY LEANS TO ROLE OF MAINTAINING BALANCE BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND LEFTISTS/PALESTINIANS. TIME MAY NOW BE

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AT HAND FOR ASAD TO SIGNAL WHICH OPTION HE HAS CHOSEN.

END SUMMARY.

2. EMBASSY HAS PICKED UP FROM VARIETY OF LOCAL SOURCES VIEWS ON SYRIAN STRATEGY IN LEBANON. PALESTINIAN CLOSE TO PNC CHAIRMAN KHALID FAHUM LEARNED FROM FAHUM THAT ASAD MADE NUMBER OF "ASSURANCES" TO LIBYAN DEPFONMIN DURDAH DURING MEETING PRIOR TO HIS DEPARTURE FOR COLOMBO. ACCORDING TO SOURCE, ASAD SAID HE WOULD NOT PERMIT CHRISTIANS TO OCCUPY WEST BEIRUT. ASAD ALSO PLEDGED TO DEFEND PALESTINIANS RESIDING IN THEIR CAMPS IN BEIRUT. DURDAH ALLEGEDLY ASKED ABOUT METN, AND ASAD REPLIED THIS WAS NOT A PALESTINIAN REGION AND HE WOULD DO NOTHING TO PREVENT CHRISTIANS FROM DRIVING PALESTINIANS OUT OF MOUNTAINS.

3. EMBOFF MET WITH AL-BAATH COLUMNIST RECENTLY WHO HAD INTERVIEWED TWO LEBANESE POLITICANS VISITING DAMASCUS ABOUT SITUATION IN LEBANON. ACCORDING TO SOURCE, BOTH OF HIS SUBJECTS--DEP. NAZIM QADRI AND DEP. FNU MIR'ABI--CLAIMED SYRIA HAD OFFERED THEM PRIME MINISTERSHIP, PRESUMABLY IN SARKIS ADMINISTRATION. THEY REPORTEDLY TOLD CORRESPONDENT THAT THEY QUESTIONED SARG OFFICIALS CLOSELY ABOUT SYRIAN STRATEGY IN LEBANON, AND RECEIVED "SAME OLD STORY" OF RESISTING IRAQI-EGYPTIAN INTERFERENCE AND DEFENDING LEBANON FROM EFFECTS OF SINAI AGREEMENT. SOURCE THEN REMARKED THAT, IN HIS OPINION, HIS GOVERNMENT DOES NOT HAVE VERY CLEAR STRATEGY AND IS ONLY TRYING TO KEEP UP WITH FLOW OF EVENTS. HE SAID SYRIAN OFFICIALS DID NOT SUFFICIENTLY APPRECIATE "NEW BALANCE OF POWER" WHICH HAS EMERGED IN LEBANON BETWEEN LEFTISTS/PALESTINIANS AND CHRISTIANS.

4. ANOTHER SOURCE DISCUSSED CERTAIN MILITARY MEASURES SARG HAS APPLIED AGAINST ITS OPPONENTS IN LEBANON. HE SAID APPROXIMATELY ONE WEEK AGO HE WITNESSED FROM TARTUS ATTACK BY SYRIAN AIRCRAFT ON TRIPOLI AREA. LATER HE RAN INTO SYRIAN PILOT WHO ASSERTED HE HAD BEEN IN ONE OF THE MIG-21'S THAT DAY WHICH PARTICIPATED IN SINKING IN TRIPOLI HARBOR OF SHIP THOUGHT TO BE TRANSPORTING WEAPONS TO TRIPOLI LEFTISTS (NOTE: THIS IS FIRST LOCAL ASSERTION WE HAVE PICKED UP THAT SYRIAN AIR FORCE HAS BEEN EMPLOYED IN COMBAT TO SUPPORT SARG MILITARY OBJECTIVES IN LEBANON. ALL EARLIER REPORTS HAVE

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INDICATED THAT SYRIANS USED OVERFLIGHTS OF THEIR PLANES ONLY FOR RECONNAISSANCE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL INTIMIDATION.)

5. EMBOFF LEARNED FROM SYRIAN ARAB AIRLINES PILOT RECENTLY THAT REGULAR SAA FLIGHTS THROUGH LIBYA AND ABU DHABI HAVE BEEN HARASSED BY AIRPORT PERSONNEL OPPOSED TO SYRIAN POLICY IN LEBANON. ACCORDING TO PILOT, WHO HAS FLOWN ON THESE RUNS AND CLAIMS DIRECT KNOWLEDGE OF INCIDENTS HE

CITED, LIBYANS ON OCCASION FORCE SYRIAN AIRCRAFT TOUCHING DOWN IN TRIPOLI ON WAY TO TUNIS TO TAKE ON BOARD SYRIANS BEING EXPELLED FROM COUNTRY. IN ABU DHABI, DEPARTURE CLEARANCES DELAYED, PILOT THREATENED WITH ARREST AND DEPORTED SYRIAN CITIZENS FORCED ABOARD PLANE. PILOT COMMENTED THAT AT POLICY LEVEL ABU DHABI GOVERNMENT OFFICIALLY MAINTAINS GOOD RELATIONS WITH SYRIA, BUT LOWER-LEVEL OFFICIALS SEEKING TO HARASS SAA BECAUSE IT IS THEIR ONLY MEANS OF PROTESTING SYRIAN INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON.

6. COMMENT: IF ACCURATELY REPORTED, ASAD-DURDAH TALKS INDICATE ASAD HAS MADE IT CLEAR TO LIBYANS THAT HIS COMMITMENTS TO BOTH SIDES IN LEBANESE CIVIL WAR ARE LIMITED; PALESTINIANS WILL BE PROTECTED IN CAMPS IN BEIRUT BUT NOT IN MOUNTAINS, WHERE THEIR PRESENCE "UNNATURAL." ACCOUNT BY AL-BAATH COLUMNIST, WHILE SURELY SELF-SERVING ON PART OF HIS LEBANESE INTERVIEWEES, IMPLIES DAMASCUS ALREADY ENGAGED IN ACTIVE EFFORTS TO PAVE WAY FOR NEW SARKIS ADMINISTRATION IF NOT ACTUALLY HANDPICKING IN CANDIDATES FOR KEY POSITIONS. PILOT'S COMMENTS SUGGEST WIDESPREAD HOSTILITY THROUGHOUT ME FELT TOWARD SYRIAN INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON.

7. COLUMNIST'S COMMENT ABOUT NEW BALANCE OF FORCES IN LEBANON WARRANTS FURTHER SCRUTINY. TOP SARG LEADERSHIP HAS NOT SIGNALLED NEW INITIATIVES IN LEBANON FOR SOME TIME. WHILE COLUMNIST MAY BE CORRECT IN HIS ASSERTION THAT SYRIA TRYING ITS BEST JUST TO HANG ON, DAMASCUS PROBABLY WELL AWARE OF EMERGING BALANCE OF POWER. SOURCE MIGHT ACTUALLY BE DESCRIBING WITH HIGH DEGREE OF ACCURACY CURRENT SARG IN-DECISION WHETHER TO OVERTURN EXISTING BALANCE BY MILITARY ACTION OR TO CONTINUE TINKER WITH LEBANESE BALANCE. BOTH OPTIONS UNDOUBTEDLY HAVE SOME APPEAL TO ASAD ALTHOUGH FOR DIFFERENT REASONS. WE REPORTED EARLIER OUR UNDERSTANDING THAT SARG HAS
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PREPARED MILITARY STRATEGY IN CASE ITS DIPLOMACY FAILS (DAMASCUS 5535), AND USE OF AIRCRAFT IN TRIPOLI HARBOR MAY CONSTITUTE WARNING THAT DAMASCUS READY TO USE ALL MEANS AT ITS COMMAND TO INFLICT PUNISHMENT ON ITS OPPONENTS IF FORCED TO ENGAGE IN NEW ROUND OF FIGHTING. FURTHERMORE, PUBLICITY GIVEN TO MILITARY MANUEVERS IN SYRIA PAST TWO DAYS MAY BE INTENDED TO UNDERLINE THIS POINT TO PALESTINIANS AND LEFTISTS. WE SUSPECT SYRIAN MILITARY LEADERSHIP LEANS TOWARD OPTION OF INITIATING DECISIVE MILITARY ACTION--AND CONSEQUENTLY EVEN UP SCORE MANY FELT ENDED IN PALESTINIAN'S FAVOR DURING JUNE CLASHES--RATHER THAN CONTINUING WITH POLITICAL/MILITARY CAMPAIGN OF UNPREDICTABLE DURATION AS RESULT.

8. ON THE OTHER HAND, LIMITATION OF COMMITMENTS TO BOTH SIDES IMPLIED IN ASAD-DURDAH TALKS STRIKES US AS MORE CONSISTENT WITH ASAD'S PUBLIC STATEMENTS ABOUT PROPER ROLE FOR PALESTINIANS IN LEBANON AS WELL AS WITH TERMS OF DAMASCUS ACCORD. SYRIA HAS PUBLICLY DOWNPLAYED ITS CONFRONTATION WITH PALESTINIANS SINCE LAST MONTH'S SYRO-PALESTINIAN AGREEMENT, UTILIZING INTERLUDE TO CONSOLIDATE ITS HOLD UPON BEKAA, EXPAND ITS CONTROL OF AKKAR REGION IN NORTH LEBANON AND PROBE LEFTIST LINES IN SOUTH. BEKAA IS PACIFIED AND OPEN FOR TRAVEL BETWEEN JUNIYAH-DAMASCUS AND BEIRUT--DAMASCUS, PUTTING ASAD IN RELATIVELY STRONG POSITION TO PLAY ROLE OF BALANCER BETWEEN BOTH SIDES IN LEBANON. HE CAN CONTINUE PROVIDE GENERAL BUT NOT UNLIMITED SUPPORT FOR CHRISTIANS AND MAINTAIN CONSTANT PRESSURE ON PALESTINIANS/LEFTISTS TO COME TO TERMS WITH CHRISTIANS. WHILE WE NOT CERTAIN ASAD COULD PREVENT CHRISTIAN ATTACK UPON WEST BEIRUT, AS PRESIDENT STATED TO DURDAH, SYRIAN MEDIA HAS CONSISTENTLY REITERATED THEME THAT THERE MUST BE "NO VICTOR, NO VANQUISHED" IN LEBANON. THIS ROLE MORE IN ACCORD WITH ASAD'S STYLE OF PRESERVING POWER AND GOVERNING SYRIA. IT ALSO IN HARMONY WITH HIS VIEW, PREVIOUSLY EXPRESSED TO AMBASSADOR, THAT NO EARLY SOLUTION IN SIGHT FOR MESS THAT IS LEBANON.

9. THUS, WHEN WEIGHING UP HIS OPTIONS, ASAD MAY ULTIMATELY DECIDE THAT MAINTAINING THE BALANCE RATHER THAN OVERTURNING
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IT IS TO HIS BEST ADVANTAGE IN LEBANON. FORMER COURSE CONTAINS RISKS, BUT DANGER OF DRAMATIC FAILURE PERHAPS LESS THAN HE WOULD CONFRONT SHOULD HE SEEK A MILITARY SOLUTION. TIME MAY BE AT HAND FOR ASAD TO SIGNAL WHICH OPTION HE HAS CHOSEN.
MURPHY

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